



**Panel's title** : *Asia as Method: Knowledge Production, Praxis and Academic Activism (1)*

**Coordinator (Affiliation, University...)** : **Dr Hyun Bang Shin** (Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science)

**Language** : English

**Topics** : Geography, Anthropology and Area Studies

**Panel presentation** :

In his book “Asia as Method”, Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010) provides a weighty critique of the contemporary scholarly practices that builds on and endorses the Western hegemony of knowledge production, and calls for intellectual reorientation to challenge such hegemony. His main field of enquiry is cultural studies, but his mode of thinking resonates across other social science disciplines. Rather than being singularly influenced by Western hegemony of knowledge production, Chen’s “Asia as Method” aims to facilitate more dialogues *within* Asia by forming e.g. an inter-Asian network of scholars. However, what does this also mean for a broader network of critical scholars, involving those “working from distance” outside Asia? How does this reorientation of knowledge production square with the current establishment that favours English-based academic publications? What does knowledge production within and outside the Western institutions mean for theorisation of various phenomena located in Asia and for making contributions to the betterment of studied societies? What is the role of those researchers working on the boundary (e.g. critical Asian scholars trained and working in the West)? The proposed panel on “Asia as Method: Knowledge Production, Praxis and Academic Activism” aims to address these questions by bringing together both established and early career researchers (3 professors and 3 doctoral students) working in the disciplines of anthropology, geography and urban studies, enquiring the intellectual meaning of conducting empirical studies on Asia. The geographical basis of the panel members encompasses South Korea, Germany, Canada and the United Kingdom.

**Key words** : Academic activism ; Knowledge production ; East Asia

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**Participants** :

- 1) **Name(s) (Affiliation, University...)** : Professor Jesook SONG (Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto)

**Communication's title** : Thinking of Asia as Method outside Asia: Core-Location and Social Humanities

**Language** : English :

**Presentation** :

What is meaning of studying former colony, such as many Asian societies, in the context of “west” hegemonic knowledge production? How can researchers do not participate reproducing such hegemony especially when researchers are located in the West? This paper explores ways in which rubric of ‘Asia as Method’ literature can be a potential paradigm for researchers of Asia in the West. Asia as Method aims to looking at Asia not simply as an object of knowledge at distance



but rather as a tool to think of historical and social problematics, beyond relying on the western trajectories as reference point. By focusing on notions of 'critical location' and 'social humanities,' in particular, this paper attempts to situate an activism of working poor neighborhood in South Korea, not as an isolated case, but as an idea to think of globally resonating problematics of many grassroots movements caught between state-initiated social development and people-centered formation of the social.

*Key words* : Core-location ; social humanities ; grassroots movements ; South Korea

2) Name(s) (Affiliation, University...) : Dr Mun Young CHO (Department of Cultural Anthropology, Yonsei University)

**Communication's title** : Gift from China's Labor NGOs: Rethinking the Chinese Social and South Korean Labor Activism

**Language** : English

**Presentation** :

Whenever I visited labor NGOs in China, activists brought up Chun Tae-il, whose suicide protest in 1970 awoke South Korean workers to a political awareness of their miserable condition. They also referred to books or documentaries about the formation of the Korean working class in the 1980-90s. The "public welfare" (*gongyi*) NGOs who receive support from the Chinese government often refer to "Korea" by focusing on the country's social economy or community-building programs recently initiated by state authorities. In contrast, among labor NGOs who face repression from the party-state due to their claim for workers' rights, the *minjung* (people) politics under the military rule constitutes an indexical image of "Korea." In this paper, I examine the seemingly anachronistic translation practice made by China's labor NGOs, and propose it not as an example of incomplete comparison between the Korean past and the Chinese present, but as a gift for rethinking South Korean labor activism. As China's labor NGOs, through their heretic praxis, disrupt state attempts to secure the hegemony of the social, so South Korean activists await methodological boldness, that is, attempts to rediscover the sites of labor exploitation while resisting discursive landscapes of making labor-oriented activism invisible or outmoded.

*Key words* : China ; Labor NGOs ; Activism ; South Korea

3) Name(s) (Affiliation) : Yimin ZHAO (Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economic and Political Science)

**Communication's title** : Modernity as an epistemological problem: Critical reflections on the ethos of China urban studies

**Language** : English

**Presentation** :

The articulation between modernity and urban space has been explored for a long time in the literature of urban studies (Holston 1989, Prakash 2002). It is widely accepted that the modernist view of space, advocated by Le Corbusier and his followers, has been dominating our views in seeing urban space and urban society for nearly a century. What has been by and large overlooked in previous research, however, is the role of the national ethos in the process of importing and



accepting the modernist view in other contexts. This research draws on the Chinese urban experience (in the reform era since 1978) to investigate the entanglement between modernity, modernist views, and the misuse of Anglophone terms in academic discourses. The national ethos of “being modern” has been fundamentally shaping the way Chinese researchers understanding cities and urban space. For many of them, a convergence thesis is maintained as an epistemological belief (Ma and Wu 2005): socio-spatial attributes in western cities are seen as self-evident and universal, and they should be sought/ built/ constructed in China. Terms in urban studies, such as “suburbanisation” and “global cities,” are imported not for their power in understanding China’s urban process, but mainly because they are signals of a progressive socio-spatial process towards “being modern.” The misuse of concepts in the academic discourses makes the frontier of the urban process a “blind field,” and eventually obscures the socio-spatial metamorphosis in the real world. This trap is a lesson China can teach for other countries to avoid misunderstandings of the urban change, which should also be included as an element of the “Asia as method.”

**Key words :** China ; modernism ; socio-spatial metamorphosis ; urbanization

4) Name(s) (Affiliation) : You Kyung BYUN (Graduate School of East Asian Studies, Freie Universität Berlin)

**Communication's title :** Applicability of ‘Asia as Method’ to the Study of Monetary Gift in South Korea

**Language :** English

**Presentation :**

This paper explores the applicability of “Asia as method” in the study of monetary gift exchange practices during ceremonial occasions in an East Asian country, namely South Korea. In the last centuries, a number of Western countries have been at the center of knowledge production. This process has influenced the fundamental methodological approach in diverse subjects. To a certain degree, such a tendency is observable in contemporary studies regarding money and gift. Money and gift are often understood as contradictory objects with regard to Western practices of gift giving. For this reason, the monetary gift in South Korea, called *pujogŭm*, is often considered as a special case of monetary uses. In this paper, I ponder whether the monetary gift practices of South Korea could be explained independently from Western centric meaning of money and gift. Can the South Korean monetary gift practices be theorized autonomously from the widespread Western understanding of money as a calculative object, and gift as a personal object? What factors of the East Asian case can contribute to a new theoretical interpretation of monetary gifts? To this aim, this paper attempts to both apply and set the limitation of “Asia as method” in the study of monetary gifts.

**Key words :** money ; gift exchange ; South Korea

5) Name(s) (Affiliation) : Do Young OH (Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economic and Political Science)

**Communication's title :** Doing comparative urbanism in the Global East

**Language :** English

**Presentation :**



This presentation aims to reflect issues and explore the implications for Asia as method to do comparative urban research in East Asia. As argued by Chen (2010: 107), the dominant geographical concepts and theories were largely derived from cities in the West even by postcolonial geographers. Such conceptualisation is often highly problematic because it cannot explain diverse globalised urban processes which are easily found in cities in East Asia. For example, we now see several Asian cities becoming replicable models for other cities (Ong, 2011: 14). Cities are often ‘Shenzhenised’ and ‘Guangdongised’ instead of becoming like postmodern Los Angeles. Comparative urbanism as a mode of thought can be a useful tool to overcome such Western-oriented structural ideas as argued by McFarlane (2010). West-versus-third world dichotomy can be effectively tackled due to their ambiguous status, categorised as neither developed nor developing cities. Such claim also resonates with the concept of the Global East which tries to investigate diverse outcomes of globalised urban processes (Shin et al., 2016). In this presentation, I will discuss theoretical, methodological and practical issues for doing comparative urban research in East Asia with the idea of “Asia as method” based on my empirical research in Seoul and Singapore.

*Key words* : comparative urbanism ; South Korea ; Singapore ; Global East

6) Name(s) (Affiliation) : Hyun Bang SHIN (Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economic and Political Science)

**Communication's title** : Linguistic fluidity of ‘gentrification’: How the concept travels with friction

**Language** : English

**Presentation** :

While emphasising the importance of inter-referencing within Asia, Kuan-Hsing Chen questions the usefulness of Euro-American theories “in our attempts to understand our own conditions and practices” (p.226). He also highlights the linguistic fluidity that produces a diverse range of translated versions of a concept born out of the experience of the Western modernity, arguing that such fluidity is an indication of how political cultures in Asia can be diverse and differentiated from the West. In contemporary urban studies, gentrification is perhaps one of the most notable concept that is subject to such linguistic fluidity within Asia. In a place like Seoul, it has recently become a rapidly accepted concept to be mobilised by various societal actors, but often entails different versions of translation and understanding. In this regard, I aim to critically analyse the ways in which such concept as gentrification has been used in contemporary urban politics in Seoul and how such ‘linguistic fluidity’ can also be taken as an indication of diverse political sub-cultures that have developed over time in South Korea.

*Key words* : Linguistic fluidity ; gentrification ; Seoul ; South Korea